

two modes of thought

Jerome Bruner¹

summary

This seminal essay by psychologist Jerome Bruner contrasts the scientific mode of thought with narrative (a.k.a. story), often described as the quantitative-qualitative distinction at the heart of the divide between scientists on the one side, and poets, storytellers, and artists on the other. Bruner suggests that the two modes are irreducible and spends the majority of the essay describing how the narrative mode functions. He explains that narrative is a “performance of meaning” in which the reader participates in a dance with the writer in a cultural context, constructing meaning through a processes of translation and interpretation, creating something that is more than exists in the text itself.

questions to ponder

The following thirteen questions are designed to help you better understand the issues discussed in the essay. I would like to discuss number twelve during our class discussion, as well as any other questions you find interesting.

1. Bruner describes two modes of thought, the paradigmatic mode (science), and the narrative mode (story). How would you characterize each of these modes? How do they differ? How are they similar? How might you revise the table on the right
2. Bruner writes that “narrative deals with the vicissitudes of human intentions,” why is this a core concept? How does it relate to causality and perceived intention? How might this relate to dynamic media design?
3. Bruner feels that the classical description of narrative as “revolving around characters in action with intentions in settings using particular means” (following Kenneth Burke) is not sufficient to account for “the stuff of stories,” what else does Bruner think we need to account for?
4. What are the two primitive language forming acts and how do they relate to narrative?
5. Wolfgang Iser says of narrative, “the reader receives it by composing it” and suggests there are three features of discourse (presupposition, subjectification, and multiple perspective) that to Bruner are crucial for what he refers

to as the “enlistment process” in which the writer makes it possible for the reader to write their own virtual text. What are the characteristics of these features and how do they function? Which one does Bruner think is the key to great fiction?

6. How is reality rendered subjective by language?
7. What kinds of conclusions does the narrative mode of thought lead to?
8. What is at the heart of a psychological story?
9. What does Bruner suggest may be the most important step in dealing with (interpreting) another person?
10. Bruner presents Amélie Rorty’s analysis which distinguishes character, figures, persons, selves, and individuals. How is each defined and how do they relate to narrative?
11. According to Bruner, does art imitate life, or does life imitate art? What is Bruner trying to say?
12. Given the model of narrative that Bruner presents in this essay, what do you think are some of the factors that have contributed to making interactive narrative such a challenging and elusive project? You might want to bring ideas from Lev Manovich² and Janet Murray³ into the mix. Consider issues like participation vs. interaction vs. rewriting virtual texts vs. literal texts, and narrative (the story) vs. the process of telling the story (narration).
13. The following table attempts to summarize the salient differences between the two modes, do you feel it’s a reasonable characterization? Is there something missing?

| | science | narrative |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| Focus | Reality, Universal Truth | Patterns, Experiences, Relationships, Intentions |
| Privileges | Precision, Exactitude | Interpretation, Metaphor, Allegory |
| Verification | Proofs, Experiments, Categorizations | Verisimilitude |
| Data collection | Quantitative | Qualitative |
| Framework | Objective, Real | Subjective, Experiential |
| Disciplines | Sciences, Mathematics | Arts, Humanities |

¹ Jerome Bruner, “Two Modes of Thought,” in *Actual Minds, Possible World*, (Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 11-43.

² Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (MIT Press, 2001).

³ Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, (MIT Press, 1998).